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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIA ANGRY OVER FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER'S
STATEMENT

REF: A. 08 TUNIS 864
[1](#)B. 08 TUNIS 444

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) An interview of French Foreign Minister Kouchner in the French-language magazine Jeune Afrique has provoked an angry response from the GOT, which took offense at his assessment of Tunisia's record on democracy and human rights. Kouchner critiqued the human rights situation before praising Tunisia's progress on economic and social rights. His answer, nonetheless, prompted an angry statement by the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which has drawn even more attention to Kouchner's original comment. End Summary.

Sticks and Stones...

[1](#)2. (SBU) When asked about the human rights situation in Tunisia during an interview that appeared in the March 20th edition of Jeune Afrique, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner acknowledged, "I am nuanced on Tunisia. There are violations of human rights, journalists bothered and sometimes imprisoned, and a general policy of closure. I am not in agreement with that which contravenes freedom of expression and association, and I would be very happy to see elections take place in a climate of transparency and competition." Kouchner went on to praise Tunisia's social and economic progress, especially its support of women's rights. He also said that as a foreign minister, human rights could not be his only concern, adding that he hoped the Union for the Mediterranean would prompt the evolution of democratic values in its member states.

Mountain out of a Molehill

[1](#)3. (SBU) The GOT's reaction was swift, alternately attacking Kouchner and defending Tunisia's human rights record. Tunisia's official news agency Tunis Afrique Press News (TAP) quoted an anonymous but sanctioned source from the Tunisian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as saying Kouchner's statement was "far from being credible." According to the MFA, Kouchner claimed his opinions of Tunisia were nuanced, but then espoused "stereotypes and hackneyed cliches." The official challenged Kouchner to name one journalist that had been imprisoned. He maintained that no journalist has been jailed in Tunisia in over twenty years, and claimed, "These are the facts. Here is the truth.

Whether Mr. Kouchner has personal reasons or motivations for occupying the media scene to live down certain "difficulties," he has absolutely no right to do it at the detriment of due self-restraint." The MFA also accused Kouchner of experiencing an existential crisis, but said that was not an excuse for "ignoring the sacred respect of truth."

Comment

¶4. (C) The government works hard to promote Tunisia as an enlightened democracy, and does not react well to even mild criticism. Even so, it is unusual that it responded to Kouchner's interview in such a public manner. This could be because Kouchner's assessment appeared in a relatively high-profile magazine; thus, the GOT felt compelled to counter in an equally public manner. Though the MFA's statement may have had a therapeutic effect for some GOT leaders, we cannot see how a personal attack on Kouchner could be anything but counterproductive. It also invites more scrutiny of civil society harassment, which the government would not enjoy. The GOT has always been careful to maintain a veneer of propriety in its dealings with civil society (Ref A), but several international NGOs, most recently the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, have documented how the government manipulates the legal system when harassing activists. The MFA statement also offers a glimpse into the GOT's self-view. The MFA statement implies that Kouchner purposely cast Tunisia in a negative light to distract the public from his own problems. While the GOT might feel Tunisia is important enough that the French Foreign Minister would use it as a distraction, we

believe that mostly reflects the GOT's inward looking world view. End Comment.
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